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ABSTRACT

Though the audiolingual approach has lost much of the support that it once enjoyed from methodologists and language teachers, no new method--fully formulated, coherent, and sufficiently in harmony with current developments in psychology and linguistics--has yet arisen to take its place. Many new directions in language teaching are apparent, most of which seem to be based on pragmatism and eclecticism. The article is built around ten slogans which are seen as possible replacements for the five slogans which Moulton viewed as the basis of audiolingualism. They are: (1) Teaching is more of an art than a science; (2) No methodologist has the whole answer; (3) Try to avoid the pendulum syndrome; (4) Place a high value on practical experimentation without doctrinaire allegiance; (5) Look to various relevant disciplines for insights; (6) View objectives as an overriding consideration; (7) Regard all tested techniques as resources; (8) Attach as much importance to what your students say as to how they say it; (9) Make the needs and motivation of your students your greatest concern; (10) Remember that what is new is not necessarily better. (Author/CLK)

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IN SEARCH OF A METHOD

Clifford H. Prator

The present may well be one of the most unusual periods the Twentieth Century has seen in the development of methods of language instruction. It is probably the time in the memory of the most senior foreign-language teachers when there is least agreement among the spokesmen of the profession as to what method of language teaching is to be preferred. In the course of the century one method has succeeded another in official favor: grammar-translation gave way to the direct method, which was in turn followed by the reading approach. Then came the Second World War, which brought with it the so-called army method that under conditions of peace became the audio-lingual approach. This audio-lingual approach--or the aural-oral method as it was sometimes called--enjoyed almost uncontested supremacy in the United States, and I believe also in much of Latin America, through the two decades of the 1950's and the 1960's. But no more.

As you all probably know, audio-lingualism had its ideological roots in behaviourist psychology of the type propounded by B. F. Skinner and in the descriptivist linguistics of such men as Leonard Bloomfield and Charles C. Fries. An often-cited summary of the basic tenets of the audio-lingual approach is that formulated in 1961 by William Moulton.[1] Moulton thought that these tenets were embodied in the following slogans:

1. Language is speech, not writing.
2. A language is a set of habits.
3. Teach the language, not about the language.
4. A language is what native speakers say, not what someone thinks they ought to say.
5. Languages are different.

In recent years each and every one of these slogans has been questioned in fundamental ways.

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There appear to be very powerful reasons, of both an ideological and a practical kind, for the massive challenge that has been leveled by methodologists and teachers against the audio-lingual approach. On the ideological side descriptivist linguistics has been superseded by the generative-transformational linguistics of Noam Chomsky and his disciples. And the latter have had a profound influence on the development of psychology. Within that discipline the behaviorists, who had long ruled as near-absolute masters, have come under spirited attack by a reinforced group of cognitivists. Whereas linguists formerly thought of language as an arbitrary system of vocal symbols that could be analyzed apart from meaning, they now regard it as the creative product of an innate competence for relating oral or written

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expression with meaning. Many psychologists have deserted the ranks of those who consider speech to be the result of a process of mechanical responses to external stimuli and now insist that the human mind conceives ideas and develops a system of grammatical rules whereby the ideas can be given expression in language. Methodologists concerned with language teaching have come to see in these newly popular linguistic and psychological doctrines a very convenient rationale for condemning the audio-lingual approach to language instruction.

Is language really speech, and not writing? The generative-transformational (or G-T) grammarians think of speech and writing as parallel and coequal forms of expression.

Can a language be merely a set of mechanical habits? If so, how can we explain the great number of never-before-heard sentences that humans normally generate almost every day of their lives?

The audio-lingualists say, "Teach the language, not about the language." But, if linguistic competence involves the development of a system of rules whereby we generate grammatical sentences, would language teachers not do well to make those rules explicit?

"A language is what native speakers say, not what someone thinks they ought to say." But the G-T grammarians are concerned with competence rather than performance, with the systematic operation of idealized rules rather than with the imperfections of actual speech.

How can every language be completely different from all others? Must there not instead be very important universal features that are shared by all languages and must a familiarity with these linguistic universals not be innate in all people in view of the incredibly short time in which children everywhere learn their mother tongue?

Probably even more potent than these ideological arguments has been the rapidly mounting wave of practical objections voiced by language teachers as they learned by experience of the weaknesses of the audio-lingual approach. One of the features of the approach that is most frequently objected to is its excessive dependence on repetitive drill of a mechanical type. "Repeat after me" has come to be the instruction most often heard in many classes. Students very quickly become bored with repetition which involves no element of real communication. Unless they are encouraged to try to express their real thoughts in the new language they are learning, much of the motivation for studying the language is lost.

Many teachers also note that their students--especially their adult students--find it difficult to learn through the ear alone. These students' experience and education have made them visual minded. They cannot really grasp or remember a word until they have seen it in written form. They find most frustrating the long delay that audio-lingually minded teachers typically impose between introducing a word in its oral form and letting their students see it in writing.

There are many more such objections. The downgrading of the reading and writing skills is resented, especially by those teachers who know that the greatest need their students have for English is to be able to read it. Teachers of older students often insist that the latter master new language structures much more efficiently when the grammatical principle involved is explained to them fully. Other teachers object to the excessive care the audio-lingualists take to prevent their students from making errors and insist that no one can learn to communicate in a new language if he is never allowed to make mistakes in it.

So the audio-lingual approach in its orthodox form has lost much of the support that it formerly enjoyed. Within the space of a few years a great deal of doubt has been cast on the validity of such standard methodological manuals as Nelson Brooks' Language and Language Learning and Robert Lado's Language Teaching. If one of you should ask me directly if we still believe in audio-lingualism at the University of California, I would answer with a hesitant 'yes, some of it', but would hasten to add that we insist on modifying the approach in many important ways in accordance with the needs of our students and our own beliefs about language.

In the past, when a widely accepted method has been challenged in this way, those who did the challenging usually had at hand a new method that they felt confident was superior to the old one. What is different about the present state of affairs is that no one has as yet proposed a new method, fully formulated, coherent, and sufficiently in harmony with G-T linguistics and cognitive psychology to win wide acceptance.

Chomsky himself may be partly responsible for this situation. Some of you will remember that back in 1966 he expressed himself publicly as being skeptical that G-T analysis had any relevance whatsoever to language teaching.[2] His disciples have thus been discouraged by the authority of the master from trying to establish relationships between the two.

It is only very recently that methodologists have begun to speculate seriously about the possibility of developing a cognitive approach to language teaching. In 1971 Robert Lugton edited a collection of articles under the general title of Toward a Cognitive Approach to Second Language Acquisition. The articles point out many of the shortcomings of audio-lingualism and suggest a number of innovative techniques that would give a greater role in the language classroom to analytical explanation and rational communication. In the same year was published Kenneth Chastain's methods text entitled The Development of Modern Language Skills: Theory to Practice. Chastain still sees some values in the audio-lingual approach but insists that there is a pressing need to make it more responsive to the intellectual needs of students. Neither book delineates clearly a complete new method distinct from audio-lingualism.

Many of us find ourselves faced, then, with a series of deeply troubling questions. If the previously accepted method has been partially discredited and no viable substitute for it has yet been proposed, how shall we orient our own teaching? Are we to conclude that no part of the audio-lingual approach can be salvaged? Would a so-called cognitive approach really

amount to anything more than a return to the old and much-condemned grammar-translation method? Could we perhaps succeed quite well as teachers without basing our work on any one, consistent theory of language analysis and language acquisition?

Many of us have concluded that the answer to the last question has to be 'yes'--at least for the time being. It appears to us that the wisest course of action for us to follow under present circumstances is to concern ourselves less with theory and more with finding out what techniques actually succeed best with our students. Instead of accepting one particular linguistic or psychological doctrine as dogma, we prefer to try to understand all potentially relevant theories and make the best possible use of such insights as each of them may have to offer. There are, of course, words to describe such a point of view: pragmatism and eclecticism. But it seems to us misleading to speak of a 'pragmatic method' or an 'eclective approach'. What we have in mind is nothing so formal as a method or so well developed as an approach. It might be more accurate to think of it simply as an attitude toward language teaching.

The chief purpose of this paper, then, is to try to spell out for you in as much detail as time permits some of the possible implications of such an attitude. For the sake of clarity, I would like to discuss these implications within the framework of ten slogans similar to those Moulton used to characterize the audio-lingual approach. The ten are:

1. Teaching is more of an art than a science.
2. No methodologist has the whole answer.
3. Try to avoid the pendulum syndrome.
4. Place a high value on practical experimentation without doctrinaire allegiance.
5. Look to various relevant disciplines for insights.
6. View objectives as an overriding consideration.
7. Regard all tested techniques as resources.
8. Attach as much importance to what your students say as to how they say it.
9. Let your greatest concern be the needs and motivation of your students.
10. Remember that what is new is not necessarily better.

Teaching is more of an art than a science. As children of the first half of the Twentieth Century, most of us would like to believe that our profession has a firm basis in scientific fact. It would contribute to our self-respect if we could feel that the methods we use are grounded in a systematically arranged body of knowledge developed through careful experimentation. We constantly strive -- and we should continue to strive -- to base as many of our pedagogical decisions as possible on scientific evidence.

At the same time, it would probably be a healthy thing to do if we admitted publicly and often that we have not yet been very successful in our attempts to perfect a scientifically based method of language instruction. No other conclusion is possible from even a casual reading of the history of instructional methods. There is no large body of relevant, consistent, and

experimentally established facts to be found. On the basis of such evidence as exists, leading methodologists have come to widely divergent conclusions. It becomes quite clear that the cart has often been put before the horse: that instead of basing decisions on evidence, evidence has been sought that would provide a rationale in support of preconceived opinions.

Language teaching has always been, and remains, more of an art than a science. That is to say, it is largely intuitive and dependent on the personal abilities and convictions of the teacher. It appears that most of a teacher's success is the result of such qualities as enthusiasm, intelligence, and love for students. At a time like the present, when the scientific justification for the methods we use seems to be particularly uncertain, we should be able to find comfot in the thought that all is not thereby lost. We can still work at cultivating and improving our art. We can enjoy our independence as artists. We can maintain our confidence in ourselves as professionals.

No methodologist has the whole answer. Language teachers have tended on the whole to allow themselves to be too easily influenced by methodologists and, also, by linguists. Some teachers have permitted themselves to be converted to new methods more than once within the space of a few years. On the other hand, language teaching has perhaps spawned more than its share of charlatans who claimed to have found new ways of bringing about instructional miracles: to teach anyone Spanish in eight weeks, to enable students to read English at the rate of a thousand words per minute. Even thoroughly reputable scholars have sometimes allowed their proselytizing zeal to lead them into making exaggerated claims for the methods they have propounded.

The present would appear to be an excellent time to cultivate the skepticism with which we ought to consider all new methodological proposals. Just now it should be more obvious than ever that methods do succeed one another in the favor of teachers. No one of them remains in vogue for long; the audio-lingual approach retained its popularity longer than most. If an effective cognitive approach should be developed and gain wide acceptance, we can be absolutely certain that it too will sooner or later be superseded by some other new approach. There is no one method, eternal and immutable, to be discovered.

Most of the research that has been carried out in an attempt to compare the effectiveness of different methods has been remarkably inconclusive. Researchers have been unable to prove the validity of some of our most cherished methodological concepts, such as our preference for presenting grammar inductively rather than deductively and our earlier insistence that structural patterns be drilled to the point of overlearning.

Perhaps it behooves us, then, when we hear of a fascinating new way of teaching English through the manipulation of rods with the teacher hardly saying anything at all, to withhold our judgment until we know a great deal more about it. It may well be useful for achieving certain specific and limited goals. It is highly unlikely to be the whole answer to our problems.

Try to avoid the pendulum syndrome. It has been pointed out that one strongly recommended method or approach has succeeded another at relatively short intervals and that the proponents of each have been inclined to deny the validity of all that preceded. One result has been a tendency on the part of language teachers to swing from one extreme to another in their attitude toward various methodological features. For example, the use of the mother tongue in the foreign-language classroom has been successively emphasized, banned, required, and barely tolerated. The ability to speak the foreign tongue was once regarded as irrelevant. Then came the direct method, which made speaking its primary aim. But this was followed by the reading approach, whose spokesmen believed that the only language skill that could really be taught within the available time was reading. And later the triumphant audio-lingual approach once again insisted on the primacy of speech. There have been similarly violent reversals of opinion with regard to many other elements of language teaching: the role of rules, the use of phonetic symbols, vocabulary control, and the like.

It is this tendency to swing from one extreme of opinion to the other that is referred to here as the 'pendulum syndrome'. In retrospect it is easy to see that anyone affected by the syndrome must have been entirely wrong a large part of the time.

It would presumably have been wiser, instead of condemning the use of the mother tongue outright or recommending it fully as a standard procedure, to try to determine the precise circumstances under which it might be helpful and precisely when it might be dangerous. With what kinds of students might it be recommendable? Should the teacher feel free to use it sometimes but not the students? What objectives might legitimize the extensive use of translation?

Place a high value on practical experimentation without doctrinaire allegiance. The suggestion made earlier that we should admit that teaching is more of an art than a science should not be interpreted as meaning that we can afford to neglect research and experimentation. On the contrary, the great value of experimental evidence as an aid to the making of methodological decisions becomes more apparent than ever in a period when there are widespread doubts regarding the choice of a method.

At the University of California we have come to feel so strongly on that point that, when we established our master's degree in TESL in 1967, we decided that each candidate for the degree would be required to write a thesis instead of taking a comprehensive examination. We especially recommend to the candidates theses dealing with such topics as the processes whereby children or adults acquire specified elements of a language; the methodological or other variables that affect second-language acquisition; the effect of teacher and student attitudes on learning a new language; the effect of presenting certain features of a language in a specific sequence; the forms of English used for special purposes and by special groups; the effectiveness of various types of language testing, etc. Many theses report on the results achieved in experimental classes or in bilingual-education programs.

We try very hard to see to it that our M.A. candidates do their research without doctrinaire allegiance. By this we mean that they should suspend any opinions they may have as to the superiority of one method over another and report on their observations with as much objectivity as they can achieve. Objectivity is, of course, a basic requirement for all research. Unfortunately it is a requirement that has not always been met in experiments involving language teaching. For some reason we language teachers seem to have allowed ourselves with unusual frequency to fall into the trap of conducting our experiments so as to prove our prior convictions.

Look to various relevant disciplines for insights. The methodologists responsible for the development of the audio-lingual approach emphasized the relationship between language teaching and linguistics. They thought of linguistics as the basic discipline to which language teachers should look for insights when faced with the need to make methodological decisions. And, despite Chomsky's publicly expressed skepticism as to the relevance of G-T analysis to language teaching, it still seems reasonable to believe that some knowledge of linguistics can be helpful to language teachers. After all, linguistics is the science that can provide us with theories regarding the nature of language and facts regarding the structure of particular languages.

The audio-lingualists, however, seem to have allowed themselves in many ways to grow far too dependent on linguistics. They tended to accept the idea that the only proper preparation for a specialist in TESL was a Ph.D. in linguistics. Many even acquired the habit that grew up among linguists of referring to language teaching as 'applied linguistics'.

Today it is easier for us, as language teachers, to see that this is both a misleading and a demeaning way of referring to our profession. It is misleading because language teaching is only one of many ways in which linguistics can be applied, others being information retrieval, the treatment of aphasia, machine translation, etc., etc. It is demeaning because there is certainly much more involved in the teaching of language than the mere application of linguistics.

Surely, linguistics is not the only discipline to which we should look for insights. It is as important--perhaps more important--for us to understand the nature of our students as it is to understand the nature of language. We therefore have much to learn from psychology, the discipline which studies how language is acquired and the personal variables that may affect its acquisition. In the United States it is becoming increasingly obvious that we can also gain much from a basic knowledge of sociology; the linguistic problems of the children of minority groups who enroll in our schools are inextricably interrelated with social problems. In the past methodologists have found guidelines in still other disciplines. Ogden and Richards built their system of Basic English on certain principles of semantics and logic. Walter Kaulfers of Stanford had considerable success with language courses the subject matter of which was drawn from the social sciences.

View objectives as an overriding consideration. English is taught around the world for a truly impressive variety of reasons. Millions of children study it in the elementary grades because at higher levels it will become

the medium of instruction in all their classes. Millions more study it in secondary schools as a key to an important segment of the culture of the world. Immigrants to English-speaking countries struggle desperately to acquire a quick mastery of the spoken language as a necessity for survival in their new environment. French girls learn English shorthand to get jobs. Airline pilots take cram courses to acquire the few hundred words they will need to land their planes in international airports. The Russians even offer specialized English courses for pastry-cooks and opera-singers. It would be a great mistake to think that the same method is appropriate for achieving all these different objectives.

The linguists have convinced most of us that speech is in some way more basic than writing. It would therefore seem to follow that the elements of language should be presented to students first in oral form and only afterward in written form. But suppose we are teaching a group of pre-medical students whose principal objective is to learn to read their textbooks in English? Shall we insist that they must also learn to speak the language?

Many methodologists believe that students must be able to hear the differences between sounds before they can learn to pronounce those same differences. If we were teaching English to a group of prospective radio announcers, should we therefore ask them to spend most of their time learning to hear the differences between pairs of sounds that are often confused? Or should we concentrate on having them make actual announcements?

In both cases the objectives of the class seem to be in conflict with methodological principles. Despite the conflict we will, if we regard objectives as an overriding consideration, spend most class time in having the pre-medical students actually read their textbooks and in having the prospective announcers practice the making of typical announcements. What students actually do in class is what they learn to do. It is very unlikely that they can be effectively taught to do something outside of class by doing something quite different in class.

Regard all tested techniques as resources. In the zeal with which they champion a particular method, methodologists often overlook a very significant fact. That is that good students working under good teachers have been quite successful in learning English and other languages regardless of the method of instruction that was used. Even that most criticized of all approaches, the grammar-translation method, has produced its full share of accomplished writers and speakers of foreign languages.

It does appear to be true that different methods tend to favor the development of some skills at the expense of others. Thus the direct method can be especially successful in producing graduates who use the spoken language fluently though perhaps not always with absolute correctness. The best translators are presumably products of the grammar-translation method.

If one really believes that objectives are an overriding consideration, then, it would seem reasonable to follow in any given class whatever method has proven most successful in the past in achieving objectives similar

to those of that particular class. Each method favors the use of a certain set of techniques and discourages the use of others. Are we really justified, however, in totally rejecting any technique because of the method with which it has been associated? Would it not be wiser to regard all the proven techniques associated with all methods as part of a vast store of methodological resources upon which we can draw in accordance with our specific purposes at a given time?

Attach as much importance to what your students say as to how they say it. There is increasing evidence and a growing belief among educators that one of the best ways of learning English is to use it extensively in studying some other subject or for some practical purpose. This is in part a reaction against certain features of the audio-lingual approach. The subject matter of the rather brief dialogues in many audio-lingually oriented textbooks tended to be quite insignificant. And much of the great amount of drilling that the method called for had no meaningful content. There was little chance to do interesting reading early in the course because it was usually thought best to postpone the beginning of reading. In other words, students had some justification for their frequent complaints that a large part of their work was sheer meaningless manipulation of language.

It is certainly possible, however, to provide some meaningful content in even a very elementary language class. Ways can be found of encouraging pupils to talk and write about the things that interest them most. It is well to remember too that language instruction must be thought of not as an isolated subject but as an integral element in a total curriculum. Language teachers can have their own objectives but they are also under an obligation to contribute to the general aims of education. If an important objective of a given grade in a given school system is to teach children ideals of good citizenship, then the content of the language classes should in some way reflect that objective. When at a later stage a basic aim of education is to broaden the student's intellectual horizons, the language classes should be able to make an even more substantial contribution toward achieving that aim.

Let your greatest concern be the needs and motivation of your students. We must not forget that students are more important than methods. Instructional methods were devised to serve the needs of students; students were not devised as subjects to try out methods on. Much of the time that has been spent in considering theoretical questions of methodology might have been better spent in trying to discover precisely what language skills our students will find most useful after they finish our classes. Will they need to use reference books in English? To write up chemistry experiments? To skim large amounts of reading material rapidly? To read technical instructions carefully and then follow them. To write exact descriptions of objects? To deal with English-speaking tourists? What is to prevent us in our English classes from giving them experience in actually doing some of these things?

A great deal more thought ought to be given to questions such as the advisability of providing separate English classes for students of the humanities on the one hand and science students on the other, so that the

needs of both groups might be better met. We should also have more research designed to identify the particular vocabulary items and structural features of English that are most used by business men, physicians, engineers, and other large professional groups.

If by such means we could achieve more relevance to student needs in our classes, we would probably have gone a long way toward solving the essential problem of motivation. And without strong motivation, of course, the student of a second or foreign language never learns enough of it to be of much value.

Remember that what is new is not necessarily better. I am not sure that an audience of Mexicans needs to be reminded of that particular truism. It is a point about which you may be wiser than we Americans are. But certainly in the United States today, perhaps as a result of our profound dissatisfaction with the current state of our society, we have lost a great deal of whatever respect we once may have had for established ideas and values. Conversely, there has developed, particularly among educators, a tendency to try out one new strategy after another in an almost desperate 'search for new solutions'.

In fact, it sometimes seems that our schools of education do want teachers to believe that anything new must automatically be an improvement. 'Innovation' appears to have come to be regarded as a virtue in its own right. Universities' budgets may have been cut to the bone, their libraries may have been forced to shorten hours of service, but somehow funds can still be found to promote 'innovative teaching'. Schools have been encouraged to think that the abolition of almost any established feature of education may result in better teaching. They have tried abolishing grades, examinations, schedules of classes, separate classrooms, even teachers. But still the reading scores of children in many of our cities go down almost year by year. And this year more freshman entering the University of California have had to take remedial English than in any previous year in the history of the institution.

So far language teachers on the whole appear to have resisted somewhat better than other groups of teachers the attraction of novelty for the sake of novelty. Though we have raised serious questions regarding the audio-lingual approach, we have not rushed to replace it by some other method, and that is perhaps a sign of our growing maturity. When the now overdue new Method with a capital M does come along, it is to be hoped that we will insist that it earn our support by giving abundant practical proofs of its effectiveness. It may help us to resist being stampeded if we remember the sad fate that has befallen so many educational innovations in recent years. It may also be helpful if we remind ourselves occasionally that what many think to be the best and most innovative book ever written on methods of language teaching, Harold Palmer's The Principles of Language Study, was first published back in 1921.

FOOTNOTES

[1]William Moulton, "Linguistics and Language Teaching in the United States, 1940-1960," in Mohrmann, Sommerfelt, and Whatmough, eds., Trends in European and American Linguistics 1930-1960, Utrecht, Spectrum Publishers, 1961.

[2]Noam Chomsky, "Linguistic Theory," in Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Reports of the Working Committees, 1966, pp. 43-44.